
SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Education Department releases annual state and federal accountability reports

EDITOR'S NOTE: State Report Cards and federal No Child Left Behind data may be viewed at the Education Department's web site after the embargo has lifted. The Education Oversight Committee (www.sceoc.org) is also a good resource for background information and details on the state Report Cards.

COLUMBIA – South Carolina School Report Card ratings declined in 2005 for the first time since state and federal accountability laws were enacted, the State Department of Education reported today. State officials said the downturn was due to a combination of factors that ranged from increasingly stringent state and federal requirements to spring 2005 student test scores that did not improve as significantly as in recent years.

“These ratings are definitely a wake-up call,” said State Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum. “After five straight years of solid improvement, this serves as a sobering reminder about the challenges that lie ahead. Both the state and federal accountability systems set performance targets that are increasingly more difficult for schools to achieve, and there’s simply no room for an ‘off-year.’ Every year’s test scores must improve significantly or these ratings will take a hit.”

Elementary and middle school performance on state PACT tests improved slightly in 2005, but high school exit exam scores showed a slight decrease. Tenenbaum said those results had to stack up against federal goals that more than doubled in difficulty for elementary and middle schools. At the state level, the rigor of the rating system for all schools increased, and the number of subjects tested for elementary and middle schools doubled with the addition of science and social studies to the previous regimen of English Language Arts and mathematics. Student poverty levels also increased from 2004.

More than 1.6 million Report Cards will be sent home with students beginning this week. In addition to state and federal ratings required by the South Carolina Education Accountability Act of 1998 and the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Report Card data also include student-teacher ratios, dollars spent per student, absentee rates for students and teachers, amount of instructional time, socio-economic status of students’ families and average teacher salaries.

Tenenbaum said schools across the state already are analyzing the Report Card data to determine where to focus their efforts.

“I have no doubt that K-12 education critics will go on the attack,” Tenenbaum said. “They will say that South Carolinians should look at this 2005 downturn in ratings as evidence that public schools should be abandoned. They will once again ignore the documented progress that has been made under the EAA and No Child Left Behind. I’m confident that South Carolinians will see through that strategy, and I’m also confident that over the long term, our Report Card results will show that our education reform efforts are working.

“South Carolina’s school accountability system was created in 1998 with broad bipartisan support from lawmakers and the business community. Our state devoted considerable resources to putting this new system in place, and we were rewarded with five years of solid progress. I believe it would be wrong – wrong in every way – to seize upon the first year of decline to advance narrow political agendas.”

EAA State accountability ratings

Seventy-four percent of the state’s approximately 1,109 public schools’ Report Cards received 2005 Absolute ratings of Excellent, Good or Average, down from 83 percent in 2004. The percentage of schools with the lowest Absolute rating of Unsatisfactory increased from three percent to six percent.

Tenenbaum said that 2005 is the first year that social studies and science PACT scores were included in ratings for elementary and middle schools. State officials said that a simulation using 2004 data showed 13 percent of all schools’ ratings were impacted by the inclusion of social studies and science scores, which were generally lower than English Language Arts and Mathematics scores. English language arts and mathematics have been tested since 1999, but science and social studies PACT testing began in 2003.

Tenenbaum said that the increase in rigor – a one-tenth of a point increase on a five-point scale – impacted about seven percent of all schools’ ratings.

“A third factor affecting these Report Card ratings is the increase in student poverty,” Tenenbaum said. “Three quarters of South Carolina’s schools saw higher poverty levels in 2005 than in 2004. This year slightly more than half of our schools had at least 70 percent of their students living in poverty. One out of every six schools serves a student population where 90 percent of the students live in poverty. That’s a staggering statistic. High-poverty schools can be successful, but they face greater challenges.”

The Education Oversight Committee sets criteria for the Report Cards. “There are significant challenges that come along with placing high expectations on students and educators,” said EOC Vice Chairman Alex Martin. “We have hit the first bump in the road

we cut five years ago, but we remain committed to the students of South Carolina and the progress toward our goal.”

Each school and district in South Carolina receives an Absolute rating from one of five categories – Excellent, Good, Average, Below Average or Unsatisfactory – based on student test scores.

The percentage of schools in each category for Absolute ratings was:

Schools	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001
Excellent	15.2%	22.6%	19.9%	19.7%	18.3%
Good	27.4%	33.0%	32.3%	32.5%	29.0%
Average	31.5%	27.7%	29.8%	27.4%	28.6%
Below Average	20.0%	14.2%	13.8%	15.0%	17.8%
Unsatisfactory	5.9%	2.5%	4.2%	5.3%	6.3%

Fifty-seven schools elevated their 2005 Absolute ratings, 675 maintained their status and 354 schools lowered their ratings from last year. Ninety-four percent of the schools whose ratings declined dropped only one level.

Thirteen percent of schools with poverty composites (an index of students receiving Medicaid and/or reduced meal plans) of 80 percent or better earned Absolute ratings of Good or Excellent, down from 20 percent last year.

District Absolute ratings also declined. Seventy-eight percent had 2005 Absolute ratings of Average or higher as compared to 85 percent last year. Four school districts had Unsatisfactory ratings, up from one last year.

School Districts	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001
Excellent	5.9%	10.6%	10.6%	3.6%	2.4%
Good	32.9%	43.5%	30.6%	32.1%	31.0%
Average	38.8%	30.6%	37.7%	39.3%	40.5%
Below Avg.	17.6%	14.1%	11.8%	22.6%	21.4%
Unsatisfactory	4.7%	1.2%	9.4%	2.4%	4.8%

Report cards also contain Improvement Ratings that compare student test scores from one year to the next. Both Absolute and Improvement ratings are based on mathematical formulas set by the EOC, which was created by the General Assembly to guide the implementation of the EAA.

Thirty-four percent of schools had 2005 Improvement ratings of Excellent, Good or Average as compared to 45 percent last year. Two hundred seventy-seven schools raised their Improvement ratings while 381 lowered theirs. Four hundred twenty-one schools maintained their Improvement ratings.

One hundred fifty-three (153) schools' Improvement ratings were raised for making gains with their students from historically underachieving groups that were higher than the gains made by all state students. Historically underachieving groups include African-American, Hispanic and Native American students, those eligible for reduced meals, Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, migrant students, and students with non-speech disabilities.

The Education Oversight Committee said today that schools with lower ratings on the average have fewer teachers with advanced degrees and more teachers with emergency or provisional credentials. Fifty-seven percent of the teachers at schools with 2005 Absolute ratings of Excellent had advanced degrees, compared to only 47 percent of teachers at schools with Unsatisfactory Absolute ratings. Schools with Excellent Absolute ratings had only four percent of the teachers with emergency or provisional certificates; schools with Unsatisfactory Absolute ratings had 16 percent.

"Teacher quality is such a critical component," Tenenbaum said. "There's no replacement for having an effective classroom teacher."

The data also show a strong correlation for schools that have been recognized for having positive family-friendly environments. Eighty-six percent of the schools that were named Red Carpet Schools in 2005 had Absolute ratings of Average or better as compared to 74 percent of schools statewide with those marks.

Federal AYP ratings

South Carolina's School Report Cards, created by the Education Accountability Act of 1998 and released in early November each year, rate schools based on the average performance of all students. But No Child Left Behind requires schools and districts to break out their performance data into a number of student "subcategories" that include ethnicity, special education, poverty and limited ability with English. The more demographic categories a school has, the more goals it must meet.

Most South Carolina schools have at least 17 of these targets for Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. Some schools have as many as 29. If even one of a school's subcategories of students doesn't meet its goal for that year, or if more than 5 percent of those students weren't tested, the school does not meet AYP for that year. Elementary and middle schools can also miss meeting AYP if their overall attendance rate is lower than 95.3 percent. High schools miss if graduation rates decline from the previous year.

For 2005, 47 percent of South Carolina's public schools (508 schools) met all of their AYP targets, down from 56 percent (584 schools) last year. Three-quarters of the 575 schools not meeting AYP (74 percent) fell just short by missing 1-5 goals. Nineteen percent (111 schools) missed by just one goal, and if even one category of students does not make AYP, the entire school does not make it.

Eleven of South Carolina's 28 primary schools met AYP (39 percent); 427 of 854 elementary and middle schools met AYP (50 percent); and 70 of 201 high schools met AYP (35 percent). Of the total 1,083 schools, 508 met AYP (46.9 percent).

Seventeen of the state's 85 school districts (20 percent) made AYP, the same as last year. Of the 68 districts that did not meet all of their AYP goals, 41 (60 percent) fell just short by missing 1-5 goals. Twenty-one districts (31 percent) missed by just one goal.

The state as a whole made 36 of its 37 goals and so fell one target short of meeting AYP, the same as last year.

Under No Child Left Behind, every student in America must master math and English Language Arts standards by scoring at the Proficient level on state tests by the year 2014. The student performance levels South Carolina schools had to meet this year were more than twice as difficult to meet as the previous year (38.2 percent Proficient in English language arts compared to 17.6 the previous year, and 36.7 percent Proficient in math compared to 15.5 percent the previous year).

"The bar was raised dramatically for South Carolina schools this year in terms of meeting AYP," Tenenbaum said. "And the bar was already higher for South Carolina schools than for schools in other states."

No Child Left Behind allows individual states to set their own standards for academic proficiency, and most states' standards are easier than the Palmetto State's, which independent research studies have confirmed as among the nation's most rigorous. Based on teacher recommendations, the state's criteria were set prior to NCLB – before the new federal law made "proficiency" the defining benchmark for the nation.

Six independent national research studies have since rated South Carolina's standards as among the nation's most rigorous. The most recent study, by the national journal Education Next, rated South Carolina and Maine as the toughest graders.

Another education journal, School Matters, recently used South Carolina and Texas to illustrate the disparity of Proficiency rates among states. Although South Carolina and Texas have similar performance levels on federal standardized tests, Texas had nearly 2½ times the percentage of its schools scoring proficient on its state tests.

"States that set lower standards for Proficiency ensure that more of their schools will meet AYP," Tenenbaum said. "South Carolina schools, meanwhile, have a steeper hill to climb. But I don't think we should lower standards to make our numbers look better compared to other states. What needs to happen is for Congress to set a uniform standard for all states."

A calculation change approved for South Carolina by the U.S. Department of Education did help a number of schools meet AYP in 2005, Tenenbaum said. The change, similar to a process already approved for a number of other states, gave schools credit for student performance that improved but still fell short of the ultimate federal goals. State Department of calculations showed that a little more than half of the South Carolina schools that met AYP benefited from this revision to the state's federal accountability plan.

For "Title I schools" – those that receive federal Title I funds because they have a significant number of students from economically disadvantaged families – not meeting AYP

carries considerable consequences. When a Title I school misses any one of the AYP targets, it has not made AYP. In previous years, if a school missed AYP for two years consecutively, the school was in "needs improvement" status.

For schools identified as "in need of improvement," parents must be offered the choice of sending their children to another school in that district that is not in "needs improvement" status. A second year in "needs improvement" (third year of not meeting AYP) requires the school to offer supplemental services such as student tutoring, as well as the choice option. The parent may request either of these options. More severe consequences follow for Title I schools that continue not to get out of "needs improvement."

Last school year, 201 South Carolina schools offered NCLB-related choice options for nearly 141,000 students. One percent of those students did transfer to other schools.

Tenenbaum cautioned against labeling schools that don't meet AYP as "failing."

"If a school has 24 AYP targets and meets 23, that obviously is not a 'failing' school," she said. "In fact, the term 'failing school' does not even appear in No Child Left Behind. We need to look at the total picture of how a school is doing, and that means finding out why a school was rated a particular way. Every school needs improvement in some way, and these data will give schools the opportunity to zero in on their weaknesses."

Like South Carolina's home-grown EAA, No Child Left Behind relies on Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) scores to determine performance ratings for elementary and middle schools. High school performance data come from student performance on the new exit examination, the High School Assessment Program.

According to South Carolina's No Child Left Behind plan as approved by the federal government, each school's performance levels must continue to progress toward the law's ultimate goal of having all students at the proficient level by 2014.